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ABSTRACT

Schools should build comprehensive programs that help children develop socially and emotionally. As a result, students will become competent in ways that can help them learn better and avoid problem behaviors. Comprehensive social and emotional development programs are based on the understanding that many different kinds of behaviors are caused by the same risk factors. Prevention programs are most effective when multiyear integrated efforts incorporate parent and community involvement. An ambitious prevention program has been in development for 6 years in New Haven (Connecticut). The program is for all students in kindergarten through grade 12, and it aims to promote social and emotional development. A curriculum was developed to provide classroom instruction targeting social development. School and community activities were then created to promote opportunities outside the classroom, and each school's mental health team worked to ensure the planning and implementation of programs. The project has reported reductions in problem behaviors and has been well received by students, teachers, and parents. The New Haven experience illustrates the importance of developmentally appropriate, integrated programs that address many aspects of student development. Student engagement and multilevel instruction are essential to an approach that supports full growth and development. (SLD)

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Spotlight on Student Success

A digest of research from the Mid-Atlantic Laboratory for Student Success No. 113

School-Based Prevention Programs:
A Comprehensive Strategy

by
Roger P. Weissberg and Timothy P. Shriver

Introduction

Over the years, policymakers and educators have joined forces to battle a series of social and behavioral problems, waging separate "wars" on drug abuse, teen pregnancy, AIDS, suicide, violence, and dropouts. Although these "wars" have been well-intentioned, the individual battles have had limited success due to the lack of a coordinated strategy to address students' needs. Unfortunately, they have also left behind a number of problems.

The "war" mentality tends to breed programs that are high profile, short term, and often in competition with programs already in place. Proponents of these new "wars" must compete for public attention to persuade elected officials to pledge funds. In response, political leaders vie for the chance to champion the new cause. Divisions eventually appear, and the war becomes a compromise between ideologies that have little to do with children. Finally, a new campaign is launched that diverts scarce resources away from whatever effort is underway, causing a dislocation of school personnel and an abrupt demand for new programming.

This formula is unlikely to be effective in school. Rather than solving problems, it usually leads to new ones–problems that no institution can easily overcome. Consider the following negative outcomes that result from fragmentation. Ten or 20 staff members may work on similar issues without any coordination of expertise or resources; few of the prevention programs last more than a few years, not long enough for improvements to be made; many initiatives are reactive rather than preventive; and, the different programs are frequently aimed at the same children, splitting them into categories underlying the social problems in the first place.

It is time for a different strategy, one that capitalizes on what schools are already in the business of doing: promoting the personal and social development of children. Let's not counter each behavior problem that arises with a new categorical initiative that has no place in the structure of the school. Instead, schools should proactively build comprehensive programs that help children develop socially and emotionally. As a result, children will become competent in ways that can help them learn better and avoid problem behaviors.

Comprehensive Programming

Comprehensive social- and emotional-development programs are based on the understanding that many different kinds of problem behaviors are caused by the same risk factors, and that the best learning emerges from supportive and challenging relationships. Preventing problems such as violence, drug abuse, or dropping out is most effective when multiyear integrated efforts develop children's social and emotional abilities through engaging classroom instruction; prosocial learning activities outside the classroom; and broad parent and community participation in program planning, implementation, and evaluation. Comprehensive programs begin at an early age and continue in a developmentally appropriate sequence through high school.

Such an approach realistically addresses problems at their psychosocial roots. Destructive behaviors develop in part from a complex web of familial, economic, and cultural circumstances. These factors are part of the fabric of life and are difficult to attack. Yet strategies that help children develop the resilience to cope adaptively with modern-day stresses can be effective, and these coping strategies are where schools need to focus their efforts.

Many educators claim to provide instruction that enhances social and emotional learning. But most base their efforts only on intuition and struggle independently, with little support. Moreover, programs that address these issues too often are relegated to second-class status. We need more systematic, well-designed programs implemented by well-trained staff members in supportive educational contexts.

Coordinated Prevention Efforts

One of the most ambitious such programs in the country has been in devel-

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opment for six years in New Haven, Connecticut. While the project continues to evolve, its fundamental features should capture the attention of policymakers. It was launched to coordinate all prevention efforts into one comprehensive strategy with the goal of building a K-12 curriculum and activity sequence that nurtures the positive development of all children. The program has been implemented through broad collaboration among teachers, parents, administrators, and community leaders, who make it possible for children to receive the support, guidance, and nurturing that make positive development a reality.

The New Haven project began when several school system committees, separately responsible for prevention of substance abuse, dropouts, delinquency, teen pregnancy, and violence, noted that the prevalence of these problems was too high, prevention efforts were piecemeal, and long-term, comprehensive programs were needed.

In response, the superintendent created a new department within the school system to coordinate, implement, and evaluate a K-12 program for all students focusing on the promotion of social and emotional development. Teachers, parents, administrators, and community leaders chose a program name that emphasized the positive development of children, rather than harping on the bad things that children should not do. Instead of the "Department of Preventive Services," they called the new entity the "Department of Social Development." Over the next few years, the department accomplished three primary goals:

First, it implemented a K-12 social-development curriculum with 20 to 50 hours of classroom instruction at each grade level. The curriculum emphasized self-monitoring, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and communication skills; values such as respect for self and others, character, and personal responsibility; and content about substance abuse, health, culture, and citizenship.

Second, the department created school and community activities that offered children educational, recreational, and health-promoting opportunities outside the classroom. These activities reinforced classroom instruction, and included programs such as mentoring, an extended day academy with after-school clubs, an outdoor adventure class, and peer mediation and leadership groups.

Third, each school's "mental health team"–composed of mental health workers, school personnel, and parents–encouraged attention to the climate of the school and the issues that either contribute to or detract from the growth of children. These teams ensure the coordinated planning and implementation of new programs supported by all segments of the school community, and are sensitive to the ever-changing needs of the community.

This three-pronged approach emphasized comprehensive, coordinated programs to address the needs of the whole child rather than initiating targeted wars to address discrete problems.

Conclusions

Over the past six years, the project has reported reductions in problem behaviors while garnering high ratings from students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Perhaps more important, the lessons it has taught about design and implementation are paramount for the creation of future programs. Here, from work to date, are six basic principles that have emerged for creating effective school-based prevention programs:

- They should simultaneously–and seamlessly–address students' mental-emotional, social, and physical health, rather than focusing on one categorical outcome.
- They should be based on developmentally appropriate, sequential preschool-to-high-school classroom instruction.
- Competence enhancement programs must address students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills; their attitudes and values about themselves and others; their perceptions of social norms; and their understanding of information about targeted social and health domains.
- Effective instruction requires teaching methods that ensure active student engagement, emphasize positive behavior, and change the ways in which children and adults communicate about problem situations.
- Multilevel intervention in which peers, parents, the school, and community members create a learning climate and reinforce classroom instruction are needed to address the widespread social problems of children.
- System-level policies and practices to support program implementation and institutionalization must be developed.

As these principles suggest, the future of prevention efforts in the schools is both complicated and promising. Piecemeal and limited efforts need not be the model for how schools respond to student needs. We do not need another short-term, categorical prevention program that undermines all the work launched in the past. Nor do we need a new law promising high-profile expenditures designed for political visibility rather than actual support of children.

What we do need is a new approach that understands the best we can do for children is support their full growth and development. When prevention is conceived in the best interests of the child, it will be educational in the fullest sense of the word.

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This is an excerpt from an article entitled "No New Wars" which appeared in *Education Week*, May 15, 1996.

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Weissberg, R.P., Caplan, M.J., & Harwood, R.L. (1991). Promoting competent young people in competence-enhancing environments: A systems-based perspective on primary prevention. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 49, 251-261.

Further Information

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